



# Counterinsurgency in Nangarhar Province, Eastern Afghanistan, 2004-2008

**Robert Kemp**

**D**URING THE PERIOD from 2004 to 2008, the eastern Afghanistan province of Nangarhar showed considerable progress in both counterinsurgency (COIN) and counternarcotics. These successes were the result of several factors, only some of which were the considerable efforts and resources of the U.S. military, other U.S. agencies, and coalition partners. Although, what worked there is not necessarily replicable in other provinces, given Afghanistan's considerable diversity, some of the strategies seem relevant beyond Nangarhar, particularly efforts at interagency coordination.

The security situation was tenuous in 2004, but by 2008 had improved dramatically to the point where Afghan security forces had the lead. Local governance, particularly at the provincial level, had begun to form and implement some policies. The economy expanded, especially through agriculture, small businesses, trade, and, in some years, illicit production of opium.

During two growing seasons the poppy crop was considerably reduced, and in 2007 and 2008, it was almost eliminated. Again, this was a result of various factors coming together. The growth of the licit economy gave alternatives to growing poppy or trafficking opium. In both periods, the government, the mullahs, and to some extent the tribes encouraged farmers not to grow poppy. The increased security by 2007 allowed the police, army, and eradication units to reliably operate through much of the province. The appointment of a strong governor who implemented an aggressive counternarcotics strategy also helped.

Another significant factor in Nangarhar's progress was improved coordination among U.S. government agencies and the U.S. military. This cooperation yielded by mid-2008 "Nangarhar Inc.," an attempt to integrate COIN, counternarcotics, and development strategies into one long-term plan. At the same time, U.S. agencies completed a "synchronization matrix" for counternarcotics. Both of these efforts benefited from the planning capability of the 173d Airborne Brigade Combat Team's plans section.

While Nangarhar made significant progress during this period, considerable problems remain, and the advances are fragile and reversible. There needs to be a long-term commitment across all three pillars of the COIN strategy: security, economic development, and governance.

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*PHOTO: U.S. Soldiers patrol the area in support of Afghan elections after encountering small-arms fire 18 September 2010, in Nangarhar Province. (U.S. Army photo by SPC David A. Jackson)*

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U.S. Marine Corps, LCpl Matthew P. Troye

Afghan farmers check their poppy plants as poppy season nears in Now Zad, Afghanistan, 14 April 2010.

## Background

Nangarhar Province is located east of Kabul, along the border with Pakistan, and at the western end of the Khyber Pass. The province has two major rivers, the Kabul and the Konar, that flow year-round and support local agriculture, the province's economic bedrock. Most of the population, including those who live in the capital city of Jalalabad, reside in the irrigated plains along these rivers. To the south is the Spin Ghar Mountain Range reaching more than 14,000 feet, making infiltration from Pakistan difficult, especially in the winter. The road linking Kabul to Peshawar, a major paved highway and a historical trade route, crosses the province from east to west. There is one paved airstrip in Jalalabad, although it is primarily for military use.

The population is almost entirely Pashtun, divided into several main tribes, with the only other major ethnic group, the Peshaei, present in the northwest of the province. The population has been increasing because of natural growth and the return of refugees, mostly from Pakistan. Nangarhar is in a strategic location due to the regional trade route and because it borders three sections of the Federally Administered

Tribal Area (FATA), an area of Pakistan that has a related, mostly Pashtun-based insurgency. It is also the political and economic hub for the surrounding provinces due to existing trade routes, its relatively large population, geography, and Afghan history. The former king's winter palace is located in Nangarhar, and to this day Kabul pays attention to the province's circumstances.

Because the province's central valley along the Kabul River is at a relatively low altitude, the climate is hot in the summer and mild during the winter. This climate and an extensive irrigation system, largely installed by the Soviets, allow farmers to grow up to three crops a year, mostly wheat, rice, sugar cane, fruits, vegetables and poppy in some years.

## COIN Strategy

From 2004 until 2008, the COIN strategy for Nangarhar had three main "pillars": security, economic development, and governance. Complementary efforts included public relations and information operations, counternarcotics, rule of law (which could be included under the

governance pillar), and counterterrorism (which could be included under security).

**Security.** From 2004 to 2008, the Afghan National Army (ANA) and coalition forces increased their presence in Nangarhar, and the Afghan National Police and the Afghan Border Police showed progress. Insurgent groups had only a limited capacity to carry out operations and held very little territory in the province. Although coalition forces remained mostly within the NATO command structure, Nangarhar was almost exclusively a U.S. effort.

Importantly, the population supported the ANA and was generally in favor of the coalition presence. Locals supported the provincial government despite many complaints, and some backed President Karzai's national administration. The Taliban did not appear to have much popular support, although this could be hard to judge because locals probably told coalition officers what they wanted to hear. An attempt by the Taliban to establish a consolidated front (the so-called "Tora Bora Front") in southern Nangarhar in late 2007 was soundly defeated. Because of this inability to confront Afghan and coalition forces, the Taliban resorted to asymmetric tactics, such as improvised explosive devices and car bombs, in Jalalabad and district centers.

Significantly, the Nangarhar tribes could muster their own forces, and in some cases prevented the Taliban from crossing their territory. Some tribes, such as the Mohmand and the Afridi, had populations on both sides of the border with Pakistan and influenced how much control the Afghan state had over the border. During 2004 and 2005, local militias, particularly that of Peshaei leader Hazrat Ali, had significant influence.

Civilian casualties were a source of considerable tension between coalition forces and the local population. The so-called "Marsof" incident of 2007, during which more than two dozen civilians died, was a considerable setback for relations with the

local community. Bombings that caused unintended casualties, such as the erroneous attack on a wedding in 2008, also increased tensions. Besides basic moral concerns, civilian casualties must be avoided due to the elevated place of revenge in Pashtun culture (deaths of family members can set off decades-long feuds) and how hard it was to rebuild positive relations with the community.

Internal Afghan tensions also presented security challenges. The riots in Jalalabad during the spring of 2005 are one example. Instigators hijacked an isolated protest by university students and turned it into several days of rioting that included attacks against the UN office and the Pakistani consulate.

Coalition presence began with Special Forces and a provincial reconstruction team in 2003. The Marines began a battalion-level presence in the winter of 2004-2005, followed by a brigade headquarters at Jalalabad Airfield covering Nangarhar and the nearby provinces of Konar, Laghman, and Nuristan (previously Nangarhar had been supervised by the brigade headquarters in Khost). In 2007 and 2008, a special troops battalion provided excellent security and coordination with the provincial reconstruction team and Afghan forces. Afghan National Army presence also increased with a brigade headquarters under the Kabul-based corps command. The 101st Airborne Division provided a battalion air wing in the spring of 2008, increasing firepower and troop mobility.

As U.S. and Afghan military gained strength, small firebases and patrol bases were established. Probably the most important of these was at Torkham Gate, which eventually expanded to include a border coordination center that housed Afghan, Pakistani, and U.S. officers. These small bases increased the security of the rural population, supported the local security forces, and put U.S. forces in contact with more of the population. While these small bases proved vulnerable to attack in nearby provinces, particularly Nuristan, in Nangarhar they were fairly secure.

U.S. military units worked to develop Afghan Army and police units, conducting combined patrols, providing equipment, and mentoring at various levels up to brigade staff. Coalition officers also worked to improve coordination between different Afghan security forces, which often lacked compatible communications or had

***An attempt by the Taliban to establish a consolidated front...in late 2007 was soundly defeated.***



considerable animosity toward each other. The establishment of a control center in Jalalabad brought together U.S. and Afghan security forces to coordinate responses to security incidents.

The Afghan National Police were a weak link in the security forces in Nangarhar. While the Afghan Army enjoyed popular support and was a source of national pride, the population saw the police as providing limited security at best, and corrupt and predatory practices at worst. A major U.S. effort to bolster the police began in 2005 with a training center near Jalalabad. Nangarhar also benefited from a relatively competent provincial police chief appointed in January 2007. The nascent Afghan Border Police was being developed during this period, and was not yet fully staffed, funded, or equipped.

**Economic development.** Nangarhar's economy strengthened over this four-year period (although statistics are far from complete). This was in part a result of the improved security that allowed markets to be established. International assistance from the U.S. military's Commanders' Emergency Response Program (CERP), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Asian Development Bank, and the European Union helped get the economy back on its feet. The growing military presence also injected funds into the local economy and provided jobs.

The increased trade to and from Pakistan (including considerable NATO logistical movements) through Torkham Gate provided various types of employment, and tariffs at the border apparently helped support the provincial government. Although difficult to quantify, poppy proceeds clearly boosted the local economy, as did a brisk trade of smuggled consumer goods into Pakistan (due to trade agreements that allowed goods to enter Afghanistan with reduced tariffs). There was also a strong entrepreneurial bent among the population. However, many challenges remained for moving the economy forward. The lack of electricity was a major hurdle, with the coalition generators at Jalalabad Airfield producing more electricity than what was available in the rest of the province. Only the ingenuity of Afghan technicians held together the antiquated Soviet-era generators at the Darunta Dam just west of Jalalabad. Equally daunting was the weak rule of law that governed the business world, and a system of property records that often had overlapping deeds from different periods of Afghan history. The irrigation system suffered from lack of maintenance, although by the spring of 2008 CERP funds were improving it.

**Politics.** Multiple poles of power, both within the Afghan state and through informal actors such as tribal leaders, families, and business leaders, made Nangarhar politics very complex. Combined with this was the disruption caused by decades of war,



U.S. Army, SSG Gary Witte, Combined Joint Task Force - 82 PAO

Elders from the village of Chure Khel in eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province interrupt their daily routine to talk to SSG Jason P. Ites and MSG Don K. Lilleman with the Missouri Agribusiness Development Team, 1 May 2010.

the influence of the Karzai administration on local politics, the influence and political relations of the coalition, drug money, and possibly the influence of foreign players. The province's turbulent history affected local politics as well, through long-standing tribal disputes coupled with persistent memories of who sided with which faction during Afghanistan's wars that began with the 1979 Soviet invasion.

Two governors played major roles during this time. Hajji Din Mohammed was influential as a member of a prominent old family of Nangarhar and an ally of Karzai's. Later the governor of Kabul Province, he was affable, shrewd, and charming, but had only limited popular support. Some Afghans felt he was unduly influenced by Pakistan. The second governor was Gul Agha Sherzai, formerly the governor of Kandahar Province, where he had considerable sway. He is a forceful man known as the "Bulldozer," and developed a reputation for getting things done, despite the lack of a local power base upon his arrival.

Two elections took place during this period—the presidential election of 2004 and the parliamentary elections of 2005. These elections went off relatively smoothly in Nangarhar, and the results were largely seen as credible by the local population.

Overall, provincial government expanded during this period, and the Jalalabad municipal government gained a reputation for being able to provide some services. By 2008, government was present in each of the province's 22 districts, but was uneven in quality and capacity. The 2005 elections not only designated members of the national parliament, but also elected a provincial council. Unfortunately, this council had almost no funding, and its powers and authorities were not well defined. During 2007-2008, it attempted to be a counterbalance to Governor Sherzai and his policies, with mixed results.

Most Afghan political parties had been largely discredited among the population, who saw the parties as having a role in the power struggles that contributed to Afghanistan's wars. Only two parties were influential in Nangarhar during this time, either overtly or covertly: the Hezb-e Islami Khalis, created by now deceased former mujahideen leader Yunus Khalis; and the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin of opposition leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

**Counternarcotics.** Nangarhar has historically been a major poppy-growing area of Afghanistan. The poppy is planted in the late fall, then harvested

in April or May, depending on the altitude. The 2008 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report for Afghanistan said the following: "Nangarhar was traditionally a large poppy growing area and in 2007 was estimated to have 18,739 hectares of opium cultivation. In 2008, Nangarhar became poppy-free for the first time since the UN began opium cultivation monitoring in Afghanistan. In 2004, opium cultivation in Nangarhar was 28,213 hectares; in 2005, it fell to 1,093 hectares. In 2006, cultivation increased to 4,872 hectares but could only be found in very remote parts of the province."<sup>\*</sup>

The reduction in the 2004-2005 growing season was due to a convergence of several factors. First, farmers believed a large-scale eradication plan was imminent, and were reluctant to plant as a result. Second, there was an informal understanding that large-scale development projects were planned that would provide alternative livelihoods. Third, the Afghan government at the local and national level campaigned against poppy cultivation. Fourth, local mullahs preached that drug production was against Islam.

As noted, however, poppy cultivation increased over the next two growing seasons. In response, Governor Sherzai led an aggressive counternarcotics campaign beginning in the fall of 2007, with support from U.S. agencies. His government had the police put growers in jail and worked with district governors and tribal leaders to reduce the poppy crop, while at the same time the mullahs again spoke out against drug production. Helicopter overflights of Nangarhar in the spring of 2008 showed almost no poppy, an astonishing outcome (at the same time, poppy production in neighboring Konar, Laghman, and Nuristan provinces was less than 1,000 hectares each).

While the Afghan government can rightly take most of the credit for this success, U.S. efforts also contributed. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and the State Department's International Narcotics

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and Law Enforcement Bureau were both active in counternarcotics, and the U.S. military supported security to the point where the Afghan police were able to operate in most districts (in contrast to provinces such as Helmand). The establishment of small bases, in particular, helped extend security to the districts, and the Taliban was unable to take and hold areas that could have benefited the narcotraffickers.

The construction of farm-to-market roads to bring licit crops to markets was important, as were efforts by U.S. Department of Agriculture officers to form agricultural cooperatives in 2005. A particularly daunting problem was microcredit, since many poor farmers were growing poppy in order to pay off loans from drug-connected intermediaries.

The plans section of the 173d ABCT hosted a series of interagency meetings on counternarcotics beginning in the fall of 2007. These meetings produced a synchronization matrix of U.S. counternarcotics efforts for the province, determining which agency was doing what, where, and for what end, while also providing a forum for discussions. This effort identified overlaps and gaps, and informed the planning for Nangarhar Inc. as well.

Conditions specific to Nangarhar Province contributed to counternarcotics “wins” in both the 2004-2005 and 2007-2008 growing seasons. Chief among these were alternatives to poppy production that created jobs in agriculture (the climate allows several crops a year), small businesses (especially in Jalalabad), and trade along the route with Pakistan through the Khyber Pass. Large infrastructure projects such as road-building and irrigation systems supported counternarcotics efforts, both by contributing to the job alternatives and by providing construction jobs for unskilled or semi-skilled laborers. Improved security reached the rural areas, the police were able to move more freely, and assistance projects were implemented. Small firebases contributed to this improvement. In turn, advances in economic development and governance almost certainly supported the security “pillar.”

While difficult to quantify, counternarcotics successes supported COIN efforts. The reduced poppy crop meant less money to fund the insurgency, and almost certainly reduced the level of corruption in the government. In a more general sense, the public saw that laws were being enforced and the

government was engaged and having an impact. Interagency cooperation, not only at the strategic level but also at the operational level, was vital. The efforts of Governor Sherzai were also critical for the counternarcotics effort of 2007-2008. In most provinces, the governor is the most important local official; having a governor committed to the counternarcotics effort, and influential enough to carry out a program, was indispensable. However, there were no convictions of major Nangarhar-based drug producers/traffickers during this period. The judiciary, and the apparent lack of will by the Afghan national government to go after traffickers, was a weak link in counternarcotics efforts.

The reduction or elimination of poppy meant a very significant loss of income for what, in most cases, were poor communities. Particularly in 2004-2005, communities reduced their crop with the understanding that there would be a payoff in terms of jobs or projects. It is important that the coalition follow through on any such compact. Farmers may be adopting a strategy of not growing poppy during years when they perceive the risk of eradication is high. Because opium gum can be stored for several years, this may give them an economic “cushion” to make it through these years. A long-term, integrated strategy that forecasts for several years (and makes multi-year commitments) is necessary. Nangarhar Inc. was such a framework.

## **Nangarhar Inc.**

“Nangarhar Inc.” was the name given to an integrated, long-term development and commercial plan for Nangarhar that would support counterinsurgency and counternarcotics efforts at the same time. This plan was informally initiated in late 2007 by the commander of the 173d in Jalalabad; the State Department political advisor to the brigade, based both in Jalalabad and Kabul; and the director of the Afghan Reconstruction Group at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Nangarhar Inc. looked at the province’s advantages—an improving security situation, increasing political stability, good agricultural potential, and location along a major trade route—and then worked to form an interagency strategy around them.

The plan was to bring together the major U.S. development donors—USAID, CERP, and the State Department’s International Narcotics and



Law Enforcement specialists (who brought 10 million dollars of “good performance” funds to the province)—and identify “enablers” for the economy that the Afghans could not provide themselves, such as electricity. Working groups also studied “cold chains” (a network of refrigerated storage facilities) to bring agricultural produce to market and farm-to-market roads linking the outlying districts with Jalalabad and the major paved highway. They also looked at how to build a commercial airport in Nangarhar, both to ease business travel and to increase exports.

As a starting point for Nangarhar Inc., the plans section of the 173d Airborne developed a synchronization matrix of current and proposed projects by various agencies. Despite a presence in Nangarhar since 2001, the U.S. had never produced such a matrix. It helped clarify who was doing what, where, when, and why. Given the complexity of these endeavors, the initial synchronization matrix looked primarily at U.S. projects, but later incorporated Afghan and international development efforts.

The COIN aspects of Nangarhar Inc. centered on the expansion of the economy and the creation of jobs. The availability of jobs was particularly important. Jobs give alternatives to young men who might otherwise join insurgent groups for employment (rather than ideological reasons). It was also key to offer jobs and livelihoods to replace the considerable economic loss some districts suffered by reducing the poppy crop. Economic development, particularly visible signs of progress such as roads, demonstrated that the Afghan government was able to provide a better life to its people. Economic progress also served to justify the presence of coalition forces in an area traditionally wary of foreigners. It delivered an asymmetric advantage over insurgent groups having no capacity to bring economic development (and whom the people saw as hindering progress).

The Afghan Reconstruction Group provided expertise on airport development, but more importantly, contacted private investors to bring capital to the province. This was not impossible—the



U.S. Army, SPC Micah E. Clare

A paratrooper of the 173d Airborne Brigade scans the low ground while providing security for a convoy passing through the mountains of Paktika Province, Afghanistan, 10 November 2007.



private telecommunications industry in Afghanistan had been a huge success—but the weak legal framework for business and problems over land titles made most investors reluctant.

The 173d plans section eventually brought its synchronization matrix and future plans to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul for a 10-day review and polish, then presented it to the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan and the leaders of the 101st Airborne Division. It was later shared with the provincial leaders and the wider international community.

Nangarhar Inc. was a decent first attempt at a difficult task: interagency coordination aimed at multiple goals, including counternarcotics, counterinsurgency, economic development, and the establishment of local governance. Interagency coordination was easy since Jalalabad is only 30 to 40 minutes by plane from Kabul. Helicopters and fixed-wing planes shuttled Embassy officers to Jalalabad Airfield and brought Army officers to the Embassy for meetings. High-level support from the U.S. ambassador, the deputy chief of mission, and the leadership of the 101st Airborne Division gave the project a needed push and encouraged civilian agencies to participate.

Several positive factors made Nangarhar Inc. a viable possibility: improved security, the availability of development funds, emerging local governance, an economic base of agriculture and trade, and the involvement of several U.S. agencies. Clearly, this project could not be repeated in every province of Afghanistan. However, Herat and Balkh provinces, also located on trade routes, might present similar opportunities. Kandahar and Khost provinces have similar economic opportunities in terms of trade and agriculture, but still present considerable security challenges.

Nangarhar Inc. was an asymmetric counterinsurgency tool. The Taliban and other insurgent groups

cannot provide basic infrastructure such as roads, irrigation systems, electrical generation and distribution grids, and civilian airports.

The attempts by the Afghan Reconstruction Group to attract private investment were important. Given that the reconstruction of Afghanistan will be a long-term effort, complementing international donors with domestic private capital will be necessary.

During a temporary assignment to Afghanistan in early 2010, I asked civilian and military U.S. officials about the status of Nangarhar Inc. While parts of the plan had been adopted, particularly short-term projects, the overall strategy and long-term planning appeared to have been superseded by new initiatives.

## Conclusions

- A confluence of several mutually reinforcing factors contributed to the counterinsurgency progress in Nangarhar. These factors were an improving government, popular support for the government and security forces, a strengthened economic situation, and a stabilizing security situation.

- Interagency cooperation saw considerable improvement, but also required considerable effort. Coordination took place at the Embassy in Kabul and at the task force headquarters in Bagram. The proximity of Jalalabad to both Kabul and Bagram facilitated coordination.

- Nangarhar is the political and economic “center of gravity” for this part of Afghanistan, so COIN progress may spread to the neighboring provinces of Konar, Laghman, and Nuristan.

- The presence of the brigade headquarters at Jalalabad Airfield provided a visible sign of coalition commitment that seemed to increase the confidence of local leaders, while keeping the “fence-sitters” aligned with the government

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and giving the population the confidence to reject the Taliban.

- Providing electricity to the province is critical. It will fundamentally change the province both economically and socially. This is something the Taliban cannot provide, and it is an “asymmetric” advantage. However, completing the large-scale infrastructure needed will require big donors such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, or a major U.S. commitment.

- The general support from the population for the coalition and the Afghan government, especially the Afghan National Army, is critical. Many people, especially the younger generation, seem to want to move forward and reject the Taliban’s very conservative social policies. Counterinsurgency efforts had increased likelihood of success because the population was almost entirely Pashtun, and there were minimal ethnic clashes.

- The relative quiet during the early years of the period under review in adjacent agencies of Pakistan’s FATA contributed to the successes in Nangarhar. Khurram’s large Shi’ite population made it harder for the (Sunni) Taliban to work its way across the border into Afghanistan. In addition, positive results in Nangarhar may positively influence the adjacent Khurram, Bajaur, and Khyber sections of the FATA.

- While programs to build up Afghan security forces received considerable resources, the civil service side did not benefit from an equivalent effort.

At the end of the period under review, there was still a pressing need to strengthen local government at all levels (particularly the civil service cadre), and a need to improve formal justice systems. Improvement of the education system, including teacher training, is also crucial to the sustainment of democracy.

- Coalition forces need to balance the increased security measures put in place, particularly moving in heavily armored vehicles, with the necessity to maintain contact with the local population. Force protection measures are often an unintended barrier that diminishes coalition understanding of local circumstances. While risky, the establishment of fire-bases throughout the province increased the contact of U.S. forces with the population. It is also best to have the same military units (and civilian officers) rotate repeatedly through the province.

- Given the very low baseline of development, the complexity of the insurgency, and the tendency for poppy cultivation to return, the international community should consider making a long-term commitment to the province of perhaps 10 or 20 years. To ease the burden on U.S. taxpayers and to make this effort sustainable, private investors need to be involved. Of course, this requires secure property rights and the legal structure for businesses to operate.

- COIN successes in Nangarhar may have relevance for other provinces with similar challenges, particularly Khost, Kandahar, and Helmand. However, a “cookie cutter” approach will not work. **MR**

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#### NOTE

\* United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Afghanistan Opium Survey, Executive Survey, August 2008 at <[www.unodc.org/documents/publications/afghanistan\\_opium\\_survey\\_2008.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/afghanistan_opium_survey_2008.pdf)>.